"I'm really just scared of the White parents": A teacher's perceptions of barriers to discussing racial injustice

Shimikqua Elece Ellis  
*Murray State University*, sellis16@murraystate.edu

Christian Goering  
*University of Arkansas*, cgoering@uark.edu

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**Citation**
Ellis, S. E., & Goering, C. (2023). "I'm really just scared of the White parents": A teacher's perceptions of barriers to discussing racial injustice. *Curriculum and Instruction Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.uark.edu/ciedpub/5](https://scholarworks.uark.edu/ciedpub/5)

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<th><em>English Teaching: Practice and Critique</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
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Abstract

Purpose- This study explores the perceived barriers that a Secondary English teacher faced when attempting to discuss racial injustice through young adult literature in Mississippi.

Design/methodology/approach- The authors rely on Critical Whiteness Studies and qualitative methods to explore the following research question: What are the barriers that a White ELA teacher perceives when teaching about racial injustice through The Hate U Give?

Findings- The authors found that there were several perceived barriers to discussing modern racial injustice in the Mississippi ELA classroom. The participating teacher indicated the following barriers: a lack of racial literacy, fears of discomfort, and an urge to avoid politics.

Originality/value- Much has been written about the urgent need for antiracist teaching practices in Secondary English classes. This article explores the barriers a White ELA teacher perceived when attempting to discuss modern racial injustice through literature instruction in a white context of the "four pandemics" (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Keywords- Racial literacy, Critical Whiteness Studies, The Hate U Give, Anti-racist Literature Instruction

Paper type- Research Paper
“I’m really just scared of the White parents”: A teacher navigates perceptions of barriers to discussing racial injustice

Picture a Freshmen English class in North Mississippi. It is September 2020, just four months after George Floyd’s highly publicized murder and the day the Breonna Taylor verdict was announced. It is in the tension of the politically and racially divisive 2020 U.S. Presidential election, when a White female teacher nervously stands in the front of the classroom with a copy of *The Hate You Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas in her hands. The desks are arranged in rows of five facing the teacher. Students sat in self-selected seats with the Black students on the right and White students on the left, except for a lone White male student sitting in front protesting the discussion by writing Trump 2020 all over his notebook and hand. The rest of the class appears unfazed by the defiant student; they are completely engrossed in the text. These students attentively stare at the novel as the teacher reads, “I blink through my tears. Officer One-Fifteen yells at me, pointing the same gun he killed my friend with. I put my hands up,” (Thomas, p. 24).

environmental catastrophe” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 352) that created a teaching and learning challenge for which few were prepared to face.

Positionality

Our personal background and experiences are a significant part of who we are as teachers/researchers and have shaped our views on racism and education. Shimikqua is a Black female teacher educator with a passion for social justice, who brought personal history to this study. Her cousin was brutally beaten by two officers in Georgia for jogging near his college campus. Her mom’s former student, Michael Brown, brought national attention to her hometown of Ferguson when he was murdered and the officer was released without charges. Systemic racial violence in the United States is the backdrop against which we live (Buckley-Marudas and Ellenbogen, 2019). Chris is a White male teacher educator with a heart for social justice who leads courses and research designed to help others act on the world for good. He has personal experience educating pre-service, in-service, and higher education teachers on anti-racist practices. We began working together after meeting at a national conference.

Background of the Study

In 2017, Angie Thomas’ YA novel, *The Hate U Give (THUG)* became a national bestseller. In this novel Starr, a sixteen-year-old Black girl, struggles to find justice after she witnesses a police officer kill her best friend Khalil. Thomas illustrates and validates all the pain, anger, and disenfranchisement that we and others experienced with every new police brutality (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017). *THUG* was written by a Mississippi writer addressing racial, educational, and socioeconomic issues that affected Black youth that Shimikqua read with her young adult literature class for preservice teachers in the same state. Like most teacher education courses across the country (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), it was a class of
predominantly White female students who were culturally conditioned to avoid critical discussions around race and lacked training on discussing racism in educational settings (Kay, 2018). Students enjoyed the book, but many were apprehensive about how to teach it in schools considering the current racial tension in the state. The apprehension, fear, and uncertainty that Shimikqua’s students expressed toward teaching *THUG* in Mississippi, became the inspiration for the present study, an effort to examine perceptions of in-service teachers teaching the text.

The politically and racially fraught context at the center of this study notwithstanding, anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) laws, initiated by then-President Trump, attempted to ban any ideas exposing systemic racism. These laws “ban[] or limit[] the teaching principles attributed to CRT in public schools” (Kim, 2021). This federal effort was immediately rescinded by President Joe Biden upon taking office, but then subsequently spread and appeared in 44 state legislatures by June 2023 with 18 passing such bills (Schwartz, 2023). In the case of Tennessee, for example, a school district can be fined between one to five million dollars “each time a teacher is found to have ‘knowingly violated’ state restrictions on classroom discussions about systemic racism, White privilege, and sexism” (Pendharkar, 2021, n.p.). The impacts of the anti-CRT laws assuredly have a further chilling effect on teaching about race in US classrooms (Kelly, 2023). This context and our personal experiences create the exigence for this study, an effort to consider these barriers by deeply examining one White teacher’s experience. While standards and professional organizations support anti-racist teaching. This article explores the experiences of one White female teacher in Mississippi as she struggles to teach *The Hate You Give* in the fall of 2020. This is a nuanced situation, one in which the book was owned by the school ahead of the study and many teachers around the country were teaching it or moving towards teaching it. It’s also a context where the administration at the school vocally supported the teaching of the
book and, simultaneously, a context where white supremacy showed itself during the study, both
locally and nationally (Janik and Hankes, 2021). As noted, teachers faced multiple pandemics in
the fall of 2020.

To situate the study, we first examine the challenges of discussing race and racism in a
context of Whiteness (Matias, 2014) and the need for increasing racial literacy to move towards
anti-racist literature instruction. We argue that the additional barriers at play were compounded
by the systemic barriers and created an antagonistic environment for teaching about race or using
materials like *THUG*, a fact we fear will only lead to additional racism and racially motivated
violence in the US and elsewhere (Buckley-Marudas and Ellenbogen, 2019).

**Literature Review**

**Teachers Recognizing Race, Racism, and Racial Identities**

The National Council of Teachers of English (2015b) urges “English educators to use
classrooms to help as opposed to harm, to transform our world and raise awareness of the crisis
of racial injustice” (NCTE, 2015). Additionally, scholars argue that educators cannot fully
engage in effective racial dialogue without critically examining and exploring their own racial
identities (McIntosh, 2015; Howard 2016). Examining the connection between White in-service
teachers’ racial identities and the effect it has on anti-racist instructional practices, researchers
illustrate that in-service teachers were conflicted by their own Whiteness and “simultaneously
interrupted and reinscribed Whiteness in the classroom” (Johnson, 2013, p. 12). In another study,
this ambivalence of Whiteness led to an English teacher initiating a race discussion and then
sabotaging it before students had an opportunity to fully dive in (Borsheim-Black, 2018, p. 248).
Scholarship shows that in-service teachers who claim antiracist stances can still participate in
problematic instructional practices, due to a lack of racial literacy (Skerrett, 2011). For example,
Berchini (2016) found that a white teacher’s own racial identity and attitude was obscured by the school’s curriculum, which ignored the discussion of racial oppression within a unit on the Holocaust. Several studies show that often White in-service teachers dodge race discussions (Kay, 2018) by just adhering to limited curricula, which just reinforces and legitimizes Whiteness (Vaught and Castagno, 2008; Bender-Slack, 2010; Berchini, 2016).

In response, teacher educators have explored different ways to cultivate racial literacy and antiracist teaching strategies in preservice teachers. In a qualitative case study, Sarigianides and Borsheim-Black (2022) found that PSTs who felt they had insufficient knowledge about race and racism expressed low fidelity to future antiracist teaching, but PSTs who demonstrated strong race knowledge expressed higher fidelity toward future antiracist teaching (16). Further studies have been conducted to explore the impact of discussing race with preservice teachers through literature study (Haddix and Price-Dennis, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2015; Price-Dennis and Sealey Ruiz, 2021; Sarigianides and Borsheim-Black, 2022).

Recently, Bedford and Shelly (2023) conducted a study applying the tenets of CRT to literature with predominantly White preservice teachers to explore if it helped them recognize racism and critically evaluate texts to explore their own personal biases. These pre-service teachers were able to connect racist events from YAL to events in real life and it afforded them a window (Bishop, 1990) into the lives of African Americans. Bedford and Shelly (2023) stated that “literature acted as a safe space to discuss challenging topics students may have been previously blind to and illustrated ways characters in stories have challenged racist norms and sought societal change” (19). Falter and Kerkhoff (2018) examined preservice teachers in two university YAL classes which used All American Boys by Reynolds and Kiely (2015) to discuss racism and police brutality. The findings demonstrated that PSTs from various identities were
initially apprehensive to discuss these topics and more inclined to take a neutral stance in order to avoid being seen as too political (Falter and Kerkhoff, p. 258). This study reinforced other scholars’ findings that many preservice teachers are reluctant to discuss racism due to a fear of politics (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019; Holmes, Schoonover, and Atkinson, 2021; Pollock, 2019). However, research by Turner et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of White educators embracing and learning from the discomfort of race conversations and “stumbling forward” in order to dismantle oppression (p.10).

Considering the ample scholarship on how White in-service and pre-service teachers illustrate the need for racial literacies and anti-racist education, there is a need to further explore the contexts for teaching a book like *THUG*. While, as noted in the literature review, the extent to which in-service teachers are or are not exploring concepts of racial literacy is not fully understood, efforts to teach about race are often contradictory and can do more harm than good if not done correctly (Milner, 2019). At the center of this conversation is the ubiquitous and pervasive nature of Whiteness.

**Theoretical Framework**

We analyzed the participating teacher’s perceptions of barriers to discussing racism using *THUG* through a theoretical framework grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). To do this, we unpack racial literacy and Whiteness as they contribute to and create an understanding of Anti-Racist Literature Instruction (ALI). As part and parcel of this discussion, we see anti-racist teaching practices connected directly to discussions of race and racism in classrooms and to the development of racial literacy. The 2021 NCTE Standards for initial teacher preparation center “anti-racist/anti-bias” work for all new teachers (NCTE, 2021). We understand the need for antiracist teaching as urgent and believe literacy practices can
cultivate social consciousness in English classrooms (Kendi, 2018; Muhammed, 2020; Muhammad, Chisholm, and Starks, 2017). We define anti-racist as challenging racism (Zamalin, 2019) in all of its forms and characterize anti-racist education as a wide range of organizational, curricular, and pedagogical strategies which aim to promote racial equality and to eliminate forms of discrimination and oppression, both individual and institutional (Troyna and Carrington, 1990, p. 1).

To examine how educational systems affects students of color, discussions about the implications of race and racism must happen in constructive ways that transform teaching (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Racial literacy is an understanding of the robust and complicated ways that race influences economic, political, and social experiences of individuals and groups (Skerrett, 2011). According to Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz (2021), there are six critical stages of racial literacy development. The foundation of the racial literacy development pyramid is “critical love” and it advances through critical humility, critical reflection and archaeology of self to the final stage of interrupting racism and inequity (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, p. 24). Identifying and understanding privilege and historical inequity is not enough. Lacking racial literacy is a compounding barrier towards anti-racist teaching, an act that is precipitously marginalized by racist or post-truth educational climates (Goering and Gardner, 2020). Racial literacy development requires an understanding of how to effectively interrupt systemic racism in schools (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, p. 24). Such racial literacy is needed in order to effectively implement anti-racist teaching.

To understand racial literacy and ALI, one must acknowledge that Whiteness as a concept is the driving force behind the need for them. Nayak (2007) posits that Whiteness “is a modern invention, [...] a social norm and has become chained to a number of unspoken
privileges [...] and the bonds of Whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity” (2007, p. 3). Whiteness, then, is the sea in which everything else is floating, the norm, or the expectation that values and empowers White supremacy and White perspectives over others. In school, White students have the privilege of seeing themselves positively reflected in traditional ELA curricula, media, and society while Black and Brown students have traditionally been denied this opportunity, a fact that negatively impacts all students. Thus, “[CWS] become a framework to deconstruct the material, physical, emotional, and political power of Whiteness,” (Matias and Mackey, 2016, p. 35) and provide educators with an opportunity to understand the “violent condition within which people of color must racially survive” (p. 35) in a sea of Whiteness.

We view CWS as a lens that holds the potential to magnify the power of anti-racist teaching, allowing a deeper look at the conditions under which certain attributes of US schooling entrenched in Whiteness can be examined and transformed. Thus, the context of schooling from which this study emanates is one that acknowledges the ubiquity of Whiteness. Even in diverse settings, Whiteness is often the norm, the expectation of how things are. Teaching in a setting where students are used to experience a majority White curriculum, a book like _THUG_ disrupts that status quo, but also holds the potential for pushback (Baker-Bell, et al., 2017; Haddix and Price-Dennis, 2013). This counterbalance effect ensures that “the racial status quo is comfortable for White people, [who] will not move forward in race relations if [remaining] comfortable” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 14).

To move past the counterbalance in example, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) center critical Whiteness as an anti-racist literature instruction practice. They suggest four principles for teachers to break away from entrenched Whiteness within literature curricula:
Prioritize book-length works by and about people of color; include myriad contemporary and empowering stories about people of color; ensure that the curriculum reflects texts by and about people of color; racialize White readers’ responses to literature (p. 42-46).

By implementing this framework, teachers break away from the “invisibility of Whiteness” (May, 2009, p. 44) embedded in school systems that refuse to challenge and counter racialized practices.

Historically the curriculum of English class has oppressed Black students and, in fact, any ethnically, linguistically, or religiously diverse individuals (Baker-Bell, et al., 2017; Haddix and Price-Dennis, 2013; Moore, et al., 2018). ALI prioritizes literature that represents diverse voices of color and disrupts White-dominant racial ideology (Sarigianides and Borsheim-Black, 2022). ALI instruction teaches students to identify and interrupt racism through critical readings, writing, and discussions (Skerrett, 2011). Specifically, ALI teaches students how to identify and analyze racial power imbalances through critical readings of diverse texts.

Unfortunately, the typical ELA curriculum limits multicultural literature and fails to confront modern racism (Baker Bell, et al., 2017; Haddix and Price-Dennis, 2013). Schools need antiracist literature instruction that represents multiple racial identities intersecting with other markers – age, class, gender, language, geography, and ability (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019; Price-Dennis and Seally-Ruiz, 2021). Democracy itself is subverted by racism (Bolgatz, 2005) and while not a panacea, let’s “reimagine ELA classrooms as revolutionary sites that dismantle racial injustice” while transforming the world and humanizing the lives of multicultural youth (Baker Bell, et al., 2017, p.123). Such reimagination can happen through ALI, a powerful tool for social change in ELA classrooms (Borsheim-Black and
Sarigianides, 2019). When educators and students evaluate how the injustices in *THUG* mirror injustices in their own communities, they can increase social consciousness and provoke change.

**Methods**

This critically informed single case study (Grbich, 2003; Patton, 2014) centers on a single research question: What are the perceived barriers that a White ELA teacher faces when teaching about racial injustice through young adult literature? Following Patton (2014), “critical research aims to critique existing conditions and through that critique bring about change” (p. 692).

As an educator and researcher, Shimikqua lived and taught in Mississippi for seven years. When she moved to the state she was greeted by the confederate state flag and booming segregation academies (initially opened in the 1950’s to counter the Brown vs. Board of Education decision) with predominantly White student populations (Carr, 2012). Meanwhile, Black students went to public schools with deplorable conditions and failing test scores. Grbich (2003) asserts “the researcher cannot be separated from [their] background, life experiences and memories, which inevitably filter impressions of the actions and behavior of others” (p. 6) which is why Shimikqua chose to do the study in Mississippi, a state with a longstanding history of racial oppression. Long before the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of Emmett Till brought national attention to racial injustice in the state and became a major catalyst for the civil rights movement (Crowe, 2003). To further investigate the lack of racial and educational equity in the state, a predominantly White school was selected. Alpha High School (all names are pseudonyms) is a top-ranked public school in Mississippi with a 61% White and 20% free and reduced lunch student population. Amanda was selected through snowball sampling based on the
following criteria: 1) taught 9th grade at an A-rated1 Mississippi High School 2) district approval to participate; 3) read and agreed to teach *THUG* for the first time. Amanda is a 29-year-old White female from Mississippi. She identified as Christian and gay and taught at AHS for six years prior to the study. Unfamiliar to either author previously, she began the study in August 2020 and completed interviews in December 2020. A member check was conducted to verify findings and discussion with Amanda in September of 2021.

Amanda was selected based on her willingness to teach *THUG* for the first time; the researchers did not assess the preparedness of Amanda to teach a book that presents ideas and conversations that prove difficult for students of any background to engage, a limitation of the study. The study itself was theorized and planned prior to the multiple pandemics faced in the US in 2020, a fact that created a difficult teaching situation for all teachers including Amanda. Data includes a case-specific subset from a focus group (Morgan, 2011) conducted with four teachers and included a classroom observation, participant journals, and an in-depth interview. As mentioned, the study occurred during the fall of 2020, which coincided with multiple challenges including the Covid-19 pandemic. While many states and districts held school online, the teacher in this study was forced into in-person teaching prior to the availability of a vaccine. Covid-19 impacted how data were collected, the learning environment being observed, and the participating teacher’s health and work.

**Data Analysis**

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1 Author note: school ranking systems serve as a proxy for class and race and are themselves a racist construct (Howe and Murray, 2015); they provided the overall study the opportunity to study teachers teaching *THUG* in a variety of schools across the state.

Following a period of processing and sorting data, we initially read through the entire set considering Whiteness as the interpretive lens. All transcripts were member checked and reviewed by a peer researcher for trustworthiness. Next, we reviewed data with the peer researcher to note significant ideas, words, or phrases (see Table 1 below) that addressed the research question before coding data, a multi-faceted analysis process conducted and managed through Dedoose. Specifically, following Saldaña (2015), we utilized analytic memos, thick descriptions, the peer researcher, and triangulation of data sources in this study. During the analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and journals, we based code names on recurring words and frequently mentioned concepts that related to the theoretical framework and the research question. Next, three cycles of provisional and theoretical coding (Saldana, 2015) narrowed the dataset to three overarching themes: fear of discomfort, lack of racial literacy, and the urge to avoid politics. To further confirm these themes, we searched for words and representative quotations within each subset of data per theme, as demonstrated in Table 1. For example, the word White/Whiteness was mentioned 9 times, uncomfortable 12 times, anxious/anxiety 10 times, politics 8 times, and race/racism 7 times.

Table 1

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<td>Anxious, anxiety, afraid, fear uncomfortable, scared, worried, discomfort, feel unsafe, overwhelmed</td>
<td>My insides feel super anxious and nervous, so much anxiety around talking about these things, just scared of the White parents, kids are very uncomfortable, I’m so anxious, these uncomfortable conversations, that fear crept in,</td>
<td>Fear of discomfort</td>
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<td>Politics, Trump, political, democrat, election, extremist, liberal, police brutality</td>
<td>He’s so Trump 2020, democrat whatever against Trump, potential fight regarding Trump 2020 flags and middle fingers, disrespect around the election,</td>
<td>Urge to avoid Politics</td>
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not do anything THUG related this week because of the election, pushing some sort of extremist liberal agenda, those people have lots of power

| White, Whiteness, privilege, race, Black, racism, colorblind, bias, ally | My Whiteness cannot be changed, intentional as a White woman, recognize my Whiteness, recognize my privilege, recognize my implicit bias, move differently than someone who’s black or a person of color, be an ally and voice, divided on racism and disrespect. | Lack of Racial Literacy |

**Findings and Discussion**

Amanda encountered many barriers to discussing racial injustice while teaching *THUG* in an affluent high school in Mississippi. The racial and political context of the setting seemed to magnify her challenges. Presented through three in vivo themes below, the findings illustrate that even though race and politics are perceived as uncomfortable topics, the literature emphasizes they cannot be ignored in classrooms. Amanda reported concerns about the racial themes in the text and the racial tension in the country throughout this study.

**Fear of discomfort: “I’m really just scared of the White parents”**

Findings reinforce scholars’ claims that most teachers are afraid of uncomfortable discussions of race and racism with students (Bender-Slack, 2010; Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019; Vaught and Castagno, 2008). Amanda’s comments about being uncomfortable as a White teacher teaching this text validate Diangelo’s warning that the comfort of White people help maintain the status quo (2018). Before Amanda began teaching the book, she expressed anxiety and fear about being uncomfortable or making others uncomfortable when
teaching *THUG*, feelings that continued throughout the study. She admitted anxiety about
discussing racial issues with students at her school. During the focus group Amanda stated:

My insides feel just super anxious and nervous. I question whether I should have even
brought that up, or if we should have had that conversation. There's just so much anxiety
around talking about these things, even though, you know it's right. I wish that I could
swallow that a little.

When asked about challenges she faced, Amanda confessed, “I’m really just scared of the
White parents.” She was afraid that White parents may not be comfortable with the racial content
in *THUG*.

Luckily none of the parents complained during the reading of *THUG* and Amanda’s
school administrators were supportive during the study. Amanda’s fear of White parents centers
her and their Whiteness, creating a situation in which the status quo of an inherently White
supremacist enactment of teaching English is allowed to reinforce and maintain Whiteness in the
classroom (Johnson, 2013). Ironically, teaching a book that actively seeks to disrupt systems of
oppression that led to the killing of innocent children like the fictional Khalil and the scores of
Black people is seen as “threatening” where the fear of upsetting White parents into the decision
about what to teach. This is another example of Berchini’s (2016) claims that Whiteness reenacts
itself through curricula that limit discussions on race and inform or reinforce negative attitudes
about discussing race in classrooms.

Amanda also worried about making students uncomfortable and this compromised her
teaching. During the study, Amanda reflected on fears of discomfort in her journals after
attempting to teach the text. For example, Amanda began the unit on *THUG* by inviting the
students to view a documentary on the slave-trade to show the history of systemic racial
oppression in the US. One White student protested by ignoring the video and writing Trump 2020 on his arm, and this caused her to question her instructional approach.

The next day she wrote, “Kids are very uncomfortable. Terms like ‘Gang culture,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘police brutality’ are on the board. I’m so anxious I’m not doing a good job presenting this and creating a space that feels safe and open. [We] [b]egan reading the novel.”

After these two uncomfortable failed attempts to deeply discuss systemic racism, Amanda settles for just reading and answering questions. Here she allows discomfort and fear to prevent her from moving forward. National attention is focused on teachers trying to make students uncomfortable, claiming that anything acknowledging systemic racism is real, for example, could lead to discomfort (Kim, 2021). Through another lens, teachers have historically perpetuated a racist curriculum and furthered “symbolic curricular violence,” the notion Baker-Bell, Butler, and Johnson (2017) describes as “the spiritual deaths of Black and brown children in school spaces caused by White dominant curriculum that fosters anti-Blackness” (p. 109).

Furthermore, during the observation at this school site, we noticed the seating arrangement reflected the discomfort expressed in her journals because the students sat segregated by race. During her final interview, Amanda discussed this seating arrangement:

So that class sat next to the people that they knew, and that they were friends with. So, in that class it was what ended up creating a segregated room. So then it comes the big question – how we segregate ourselves? What I noticed, though, is that [...] when we were in the midst of all the initial discomfort, the rows further separated. And one of my hesitations for moving was again cross contact tracing. And having been exposed if I move them and then that technically means that they’ve been exposed to twice as many people [...]
And so, if we were having these uncomfortable conversations that often feel unsafe, because they're uncomfortable, then moving them didn't feel like the wisest option yet [...] and I just really had a major internal battle with what the right thing to do was [...] [and] I still don't know.

Amanda’s intention to create an inclusive safe space to discuss racism is contradicted here because she allows the students to sit segregated by race the entire time. This a prime example of how Johnson (2013) states that White teachers can simultaneously interrupt and reinscribe Whiteness in the classroom without effective training (p. 231). This lack of certainty and confidence in her instructional methods illustrates why training on fostering inclusive safe spaces and courageous conversations in the classroom are paramount. Her emphasis on protecting or maintaining comfort zones, instead of desegregating the seats further illustrates the point that this is a barrier.

**Urge to Avoid Politics: “He’s so Trump 2020”**

The urge to avoid politics was a main concern Amanda consistently mentioned through data collected. In the focus group, she expressed her concerns about discussing the text with students who had opposing political views. She stated:

I'm concerned about... I mean, really it's one student in my classroom. I have one student who is just like... And isn't it interesting that this one White boy, wins [...] like, this is who I'm worried about. He's so Trump 2020, writes it on his arm, he's told me my Safe Space sticker offends him, he's told me that COVID's not real, that it's a Democrat whatever against Trump. I mean, just ridiculous.

This particular student’s political views continued to be a concern for Amanda while teaching the text. She reflected on her challenges with this particular student in her daily journals:
A student verbally expressed disapproval. This student continued in class to make remarks and disapproving mannerisms when discussing racism and Black America. He is writing Trump 2020 to protest the discussion all over his notebook and hand. We had two or three conversations all of which were uncomfortable and felt like they didn’t go anywhere. I ended up going to the principal and his behavior specialist to head off something further coming from him in class. The other students, my Black students, are uncomfortable and watching his every move. I am very anxious and overwhelmed. This is far from easy and enjoyable right now.

This is another example of how Whiteness and White privilege prevail. One White male is vandalizing school property and his behavior is threatening several Black students. Instead of being expelled his comfort is prioritized over the discomfort of several Black students in the classroom.

By the end of October, her journal reveals how the political climate intensifies and turns into violence at her school. She writes:

Students discussed a potential fight regarding Trump 2020 flags and middle fingers. My student that often shares disapproval thoughts/views was not here. They were sent home due to safety issues/disrespect around the election.

Amanda’s journal entries continue to expose political power struggles as barriers that she faced while attempting to teach *THUG*, during the context of Trumpism in the deep South leading to the 2020 presidential election. On the Monday before the election, she wrote, “I wanted to just not do anything *THUG* related this week, because of the election. That fear crept in and then I remembered how stinkin’ purposeful it felt to be wrapping up this week.” Amanda’s urge to avoid politics and fear of discomfort were so strong she considered not teaching the book during
election week. Shortly thereafter Amanda finished teaching the book and reflected on her experience by voicing her fears and frustrations regarding the political climate that she struggled to navigate in her classroom:

> It just makes me nervous to have parents who think that I'm pushing some sort of extremist liberal agenda, because that is a real perspective that exists in the world. That made me nervous; those people often have a lot of power.

These findings reflect the common misperception that teachers should keep personal opinions regarding race and politics away from students in classrooms and align with Pollock’s (2019) concerns that the promotion of fake news and intolerance by government officials has caused educators to be “labeled partisan” when they simply attempt to challenge hate or teach facts in their own classrooms (p. 27). The lack of productive bipartisan dialogue in this country at the time of this study is mirrored in Amanda’s classroom with “students separating/segregating themselves, vandalizing desks with Trump 2020 markings, and getting into fights.” Kay (2018) explains teachers’ reasoning for avoiding politics in the classroom, “Teachers don’t know how to check kids when they say something racist. Teachers don’t know what to do. It’s easier not to talk about politics” (p. 246).

Even though this study took place during an intense presidential election, discussions of politics in the classroom were viewed as unsafe and, therefore, were avoided. According to the data, the 2020 election and ongoing Black Lives Matter demonstrations heavily influenced Amanda’s perspectives and interactions with students in the classroom. The findings show that even though she found the racial/political content in the text significant, she still had the desire to completely avoid it during election week. These findings support Milner’s (2019) claims that when it comes to politics, teachers “struggle less about what they should address than how to
engage their students in ways that are powerfully constructive [and] if teachers aren’t properly prepared to engage their students productively, we can do more harm than good” (p. 34).

Scholars argue that teaching is a political act and educators must come to terms with this concept in order to effectively implement change (Pollock, 2019). Our schools must prepare students to participate in democracy, and educators cannot do this if they don’t give students opportunities to analyze, critique, and discuss politics at school. Teachers and students need to know how to recognize inequity and how to address it (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2022).

**Lack of Racial Literacy: “God I pray”**

In the focus group, Amanda expressed that her racial identity and limited racial literacy may make teaching *THUG* a difficult and uncomfortable experience. When asked how her identity and experiences will affect how she teaches *THUG* Amanda said:

Then it's also this White teacher is going to stand up and teach me about this experience, that I know nothing about? That I can't actually experience ever? Like, how does the White woman stand up and teach this book to the kids? I don't know.

This statement reflects how Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) describe that sometimes Whites get stuck on feelings of guilt and shame in their initial explorations of their own Whiteness that can create a paralysis that they need to get past in order to move forward with ALI (p. 50).

Amanda reiterated the discomfort that a lack of racial literacy causes in her final interview. She declared:

It's just absolutely not realistic to say that, as a teacher, and as a White teacher, you're going to come into the room and teach this book and not be uncomfortable. If you're not uncomfortable you're not doing it right.
Amanda’s comments support Diangelo’s (2018) claims that “to interrupt White fragility, we need to build our capacity to sustain the discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of racial humility” (p.14). Racial literacy development, according to Price-Dennis and Seally-Ruiz (2021) requires critical humility, which is something Amanda worked towards while teaching the text.

The racial injustice in the book and the racial injustice in the country impacted her desire to be more racially literate and implement ALI. Amanda reflected on this when she wrote:

Breonna Taylor’s verdict came out. The world feels dreary and heavy to me [...] to many. Students read Khalil’s death, murder. I cannot shake the intensity, the power, the purpose. Even knowing this, I feel anxious and uncertain about how I’m doing. Especially wanted to be careful, cautious, purposeful and intentional as a White woman. My Whiteness cannot be changed. What I do with it can. God I pray.

This journal illustrates Amanda’s examination of her own Whiteness and development of racial literacy while teaching this text. She reflects on her identity as a White woman and is aware of the damage Whiteness unchecked can cause. This journal entry illustrates the important reflective process that Turner, et al (2023) call *stumbling forward*. Amanda critically explores her Whiteness while trying to teach THUG. However, Amanda is unsure of how to leverage her Whiteness to advocate for her students and interrupt racial inequity effectively, which is a major component of racial literacy development (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

When asked about the meaning behind this journal entry, Amanda stated:

I mean on a very basic level our race is something that we do not have control over. It is who we are. It is such a huge part of our identity and whether that's for better or for worse, it's important to recognize people talk about being colorblind, and I don't think that's productive. I have to recognize my Whiteness so that I can recognize my privilege.
So that I can recognize my implicit bias, or that I can recognize that I'll move through the 
world differently than someone who's Black or a Person of Color. What I can change is 
what I do with that privilege, or what I do with my position in this world. I think that's to 
fight and to be an ally and voice when I'm supposed to be and ears when I'm supposed to 
be. Then learning when to be one or the other and showing up for my friends and for my 
students. I think that this was very much something that I felt was a part of my own 
personal and spiritual journey, at the center of my prayers during that time period.

These intimate reflections reinforce the need for courageous conversations regarding race and 
avacidy in classrooms. Amanda’s words illustrate how every teacher needs the opportunity to 
process the concepts of race, privilege, positionality, and advocacy for themselves before 
addressing them with students. In order for White teachers to effectively implement ALI, 
teachers must examine their own Whiteness and learn how to interrupt the systems of 
oppression. This is why antiracist teaching practices are tools needed by all teachers. These 
findings, while limited to one teacher, support the literature that claims some teachers have not 
been taught how to be racially literate and are unwilling to risk controversy or conflict that they 
are untrained to handle (Bolgatz, 2005). These findings reinforce scholars' claims that without 
proper training White teachers often feel inadequate and confused about how to address issues of 
White dominance and racial oppression in multiracial school settings (Howard, 2016). Findings 
also show Amanda experiencing her own internal struggle with the complexity of her Whiteness 
in light of anti-racist teaching (Matias and Mackey, 2016). Her personal journey during the study 
illustrates the argument that teachers must have the opportunity to evaluate their own perceptions 
of race before they can confidently engage in meaningful anti-racist dialogue in the classroom 
(Howard, 2016; McIntosh, 2015).
If these were the conditions for teaching a book like *THUG* in our schools, teachers are facing a climate much less conducive to teaching about race following the end of this study. Just like Amanda faced a more politically volatile climate after agreeing to teach the book. Will the forces decrying such work as CRT cause English teachers to further shy away from anti-racist pedagogies? Amanda—and almost all English teachers in the US—need a stronger foundation from which they can apply good intentions and intersectional identities to the teaching of *THUG* (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Unfortunately, Whiteness especially in the education system, continues to reinforce, reinvent, and, repeat itself (Borsheim-Black, 2018). New barriers continue to be added to old barriers to maintain the status quo. If, the teaching of English is stamped with racism and that’s part of the experience in most US classrooms challenges abound to envisioning a more just future.

**Conclusion**

Racism is in the air we breathe and the books we teach. When teachers take an opportunity to teach a book that reveals the devastating impacts of systemic racism, it is unsurprising responses are laced with the same poison. As racial violence and hatred continue to terrorize our students and communities, educators must take a stand against racial injustice in their classrooms. Amanda’s students enjoyed reading *THUG*, but she perceived significant barriers to successfully teaching it in a context of Whiteness compounded by four pandemics (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Teaching literature should make people uncomfortable, and society will have to decide whether it would prefer the discomfort Amanda’s students experienced in learning about racial injustice or the very tangible discomfort of racially motivated violence towards Black and Brown bodies. As a profession, we must grapple with the notion of whether what we are doing in terms of supporting the Amandas of the world is enough and act with
urgency and courage in the face of ever-evolving—and devolving—contexts for teaching and learning.

In order to effectively implement ALI, educators must get to a point where we don’t retreat and run back to the White-washed curriculum every time a White parent gets uncomfortable. Amanda, in an acknowledgment of her fear of the White parents of her students, invoked a higher power in a spoken-out-loud Hail Mary, “God I pray,” in hopes that teaching *THUG* would not explode in her face; it could have. She bravely took on this challenge at a school where the same book was banned—pulled out of the students’ hands in the middle of her class—the next school year. ALI depends on teachers knowing what to do in these situations and how to overcome any and all barriers.

**References**


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2 Amanda shared this development with the researchers during a member check that was conducted during late fall 2021.

Bishop, R.S., (1990), "Windows and mirrors: Children’s books and parallel cultures”, In *California State University reading conference: 14th annual conference proceedings*, pp.3-12.


Howard, G. (2016), We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools, Teachers College Press, New York, NY.


“Barriers to Discussing Racial Injustice”


Pendharkar, E. (2021), "A $5 million fine for classroom discussions on race? In Tennessee, this is the new reality", *Education Week*, Available at: https://www.edweek.org/leadership/a-5-million-fine-for-classroom-discussions-on-race-in-tennessee-this-is-the-new-reality/2021/08


Editors Comments to Author:

p. 2: provide a citation for the important point “in a state historically known for racist policies” … For ex: https://abcnews.go.com/US/oppressive-legislation-mississippi-house-passes-controversial-bill/story?id=97004623 … The article includes the sentence: “Several lawmakers compared the bill to Jim Crow-era laws and racist legislation of the past.” Thank you for this helpful suggestion. We made this change to the document.

p. 2: revise “racism” to “systemic racism” and provide a citation for: “the very existence of racism was actively questioned by one candidate” … For ex: https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/09/01/trump-systemic-racism-ebof-vpx.cnn We changed racism to systemic racism and added that citation to it. Thank you!

p. 3/ p. 5: Provide a citation following the sentence “Systemic racial violence in the United States America is the backdrop against which we live” (p. 3) and “a fact we fear will only lead to additional racism and racially motivated violence in America the US and elsewhere” (p. 5). The citation will be helpful to readers who want to learn further with your article. It may be the same citation for both sentences. We added Buckley-Marudas, M., & Ellenbogen, C. (2019). Using YA literature to support students as they wrestle with violence, police brutality, and trauma: Engaging the hate u give. The ALAN Review, 46(3), 71-83.

p. 3: Similarly, provide a citation following the sentence “Thomas illustrates and validates all the pain, anger, and disenfranchisement that we and others experienced with every new police brutality.” For ex., Baker-Bell, A., Butler, T., & Johnson, L. (2017). The pain and the wounds: A call for critical race English education in the wake of racial violence. English Education, 116-129. We added this citation on page three to substantiate the claim made in that sentence.

p. 4: Provide a citation to support “predominantly White female students who were culturally conditioned to avoid critical discussions” We added this Kay, M. (2018). Not light, but fire: How to lead meaningful race conversations in the classroom. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers.

p. 5: For the reader who may seek further information for contextualizing your work in thir teaching contexts, provide a citation to support the important phrase: “a context where white supremacy showed itself during the study, both locally and nationally.” We added a reference to a Southern Poverty Law Center article that discusses the national context of white supremacy throughout 2020, especially in the fall.

p. 5: Provide a citation for the sentence “Most, if not all, teachers in the US described this particular semester—fall 2020—as one of if not the most difficult to date.” We
elected to change that sentence to reference the previous citation of multiple pandemics.

pp. 8/9, p. 21: Do Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz use the term “full racial literacy”? If not, revise “Full racial literacy development requires an understanding of how to effectively interrupt systemic racism in schools (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, p. 24). Full racial literacy is needed in order to effectively implement anti-racist teaching” to something such as “Racial literacy development requires an understanding of how to effectively interrupt systemic racism in schools (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz, p. 24). Such racial literacy is needed in order to effectively implement anti-racist teaching” This has been addressed on pages 8, 9, and 21.

p. 10: Rephrase “oppressed anyone in the non-dominant parts of culture” in a way that situates the claim more pointedly, and does not center Whiteness (i.e., “oppressed culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse individuals”) On page 10 this has been changed to - Historically the curriculum of English class has oppressed Black students and, in fact, any ethnically, linguistically, or religiously diverse individuals.

p. 11: Provide a citation to support: “segregation academies (initially opened in the 1950’s to counter the Brown vs. Board of Education decision) with predominantly White student populations” On page 11, inserted the following citation (Carr, 2012).

p. 15: Revise “fear of upsetting Whites” to “fear of upsetting White parents” or something similar this was changed to fear of upsetting White parents. Thank you for catching that mistake we made!

p. 16: Provide a citation for the phrase “National attention is focused on teachers trying to make students uncomfortable, claiming that anything acknowledging systemic racism is real, for example, could lead to discomfort.” Perhaps with a citation added above. We returned here to the Kim citation from earlier which details this issue as teachers are facing it.

p. 17 / p. 24: Recast claim to be more pointed, and a bit less general; i.e., rephrase the phrasing “is the exact reason” (p. 17) … rephrase the phrasing “… depends on teachers knowing exactly what to do in these situations and how to bust through any and all barriers. Voting rights, freedom of speech, freedom to think critically, human rights and the safety of Black and Brown bodies in this country depend on this” (p. 24) This has been addressed on page 17 where we removed “is the exact reason” and replaced it with “illustrated.” Then on page 24 we made revisions to make the claim more pointed and eliminated the final sentence which was too general.
p. 23: Provide a citation for the phrase “Unfortunately, Whiteness especially in the education system, continues to reinforce, reinvent, and, repeat itself.” Perhaps a citation added above. We added this (Borsheim-Black, 2018) citation here.

p. 24: Was the book “pulled out of the students’ hands in the middle of class” … Provide a bit of context for how the authors observed / were made aware of this detail. We added a footnote explaining that during a member check the participating teacher informed the researchers that she was in the middle of teaching the text again and her administrator told her to stop immediately and she had to take the book from students.